

Yanukovych Declares Day of Mourning as EU Prepares to Discuss Sanctions

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych has designated Thursday a day of mourning for those who died during the riots in Kiev as the European Union took a step toward imposing sanctions on the country.

Ukrainian flags will be flown at half mast throughout the country, while all sporting fixtures and entertainment functions will be canceled, in accordance with an order published on the president's website.

The latest bout of unrest started Tuesday when riot police prevented protesters from marching toward the Ukrainian parliament building, before trying to clear them out of their stronghold on Independence Square, which had largely been a scene of peaceful protests.

They were met with fierce resistance and in the clashes that followed, 25 people died — nine

of them police — and more than 350 were injured.

Five hundred paratroopers have been sent to Kiev from Dnepropetrovsk, about 450 kilometers to the southeast, Ukrainian Defense Minister Pavel Lebedev said, Left Shore news agency reported Wednesday.

The anti-government protests started in November in response to the Yanukovych administration's decision to turn its back on a trade deal with the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia.

President Vladimir Putin spoke to Yanukovych by telephone as recently as last night, but did not offer advice on how to handle the current situation, Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Wednesday.

Peskov said that his boss has never been consulted on Ukrainian affairs by his counterparts in Kiev and has no intention of giving them advice in the future.

He declined to outline what was said between the two presidents.

Disorder is spreading throughout the country, with regional administration buildings and prosecutors offices in Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk being occupied by protesters, Lenta.ru reported.

Protesters in Lviv have taken the Prosecutor General's Office and a number of security services headquarters.

Viktor Pshonka, Ukraine's prosecutor general, laid the blame for the riots at the feet of the opposition, whereas a number of Western politicians, including Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and British Foreign Minister William Hague, held the Ukrainian authorities responsible.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton has called for an emergency meeting of the EU member states' foreign ministers to discuss the crisis, Bildt wrote on his Twitter account Wednesday.

A number of governments, including those of Sweden, Poland and France, have come out in favor of sanctions against Ukraine, The Wall Street Journal reported. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier criticized Yanukovych's "delaying tactics," saying that it was a mistake not to enter into serious negotiations.

Yanukovych met with a number of opposition leaders Tuesday night, but the talks failed to make any headway, with Vitali Klitschko calling the president's approach to the situation "irrational."

A spokesman for the European Commission said Wednesday that any decision on sanctions will be made by the EU member states and added that the offer of an association agreement between the EU and Ukraine is still on the table, Interfax reported.

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